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THE SKULL OF SIR THOMAS BROWNE.

THE  
MEASUREMENTS OF THE SKULL  
OF  
SIR THOMAS BROWNE.

BY  
CHARLES WILLIAMS,  
*NORWICH.*



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# The Measurements of the Skull of Sir Thomas Browne.\*

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CHARLES WILLIAMS, NORWICH.

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\* SIR THOMAS BROWNE died on October 19th, 1682, and was buried in the church of St. Peter Mancroft, Norwich. In 1840 his skull was “knaved out of its grave” by the sexton. It appears that some workmen who were employed in making a grave for the incumbent’s wife accidentally broke into the vault which contained the coffin of Sir Thomas Browne. In some unexplained way they fractured the lid of the coffin, and thereby exposed the skeleton. The sexton did not consider it an act of sacrilege to take possession of the skull and to offer it for sale. Eventually the late Dr. Edward Lubbock became its possessor, and in 1845 the skull was deposited by him in the pathological museum of the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital,

\* The *Lancet*, June 8th, 1895.

where it is still to be seen, under its glass case, reverently preserved and protected, and long may it remain, not as an object of curiosity, but as a means of directing the attention of visitors to the learned works of that great scholar. The coffin plate of brass was also broken lengthwise at the same time. On it were engraved the remarkable lines, most probably written by his eldest son, Edward: "The best bred man" of Charles II.'s Court, President of the College of Physicians, and Physician to St. Bartholomew's Hospital. "*Hoc loculo indormiens corporis spagyrici pulvere plumbum in aurum convertit.*" It is a singular circumstance that the lead of which the coffin was made was found to be completely decomposed and to have changed to a carbonate which crumbled at the touch.

The measurements of the skull are expressed in English inches and tenths, and have recently been taken by means of Sir William Flower's craniometer, according to the elaborate method suggested and carried out so extensively by the late Dr. Barnard Davis, the possessor of 1800 human skulls, recently deposited in the Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons of England, and to whom, as well as to Dr. Thurnham, the science of anthropology is so deeply indebted for the production of that great work, "Crania Britannica." The skull may be placed in the dolicho-cephalic class. It is quite edentulous, but is in a state of excellent preservation. The forehead is remarkably low and depressed; the head unusually long, the back part exhibiting a singular appearance of depth and capaciousness.

2.5  
2.5  
12.5  
2.5  
6.25

6  
160  
69  
140  
140

- A. Internal capacity, in ounces avoirdupois of dry sand, 69  
ounces.
- B. *Circumference* round the forehead about an inch above  
the naso-frontal and suture over the most prominent part  
of the occiput - - - 21.5 inches.
- C. *Fronto-Occipital arch*, from the fronto-nasal suture along  
the centre of the calvarium to the posterior edge of the  
foramen magnum - - - 15 inches.  
 (a) Length of the frontal portion - 5 inches.  
 (b) „ „ parietal portion - 5 „  
 (c) „ „ occipital portion - 5 „
- D. *Intermastoid arch*, from the tip of one mastoid process  
across the vortex to the tip of the other - 14.5 inches.
- E. *Longitudinal diameter*, or length from the glabella to the  
most prominent point of the occiput, the glabella  
being regarded as about an inch above the naso-frontal  
suture - - - 7.7 inches.
- F. *Transverse diameter*, or greatest breadth.  
 Interparietal - - - 5.8 inches.  
 Intertemporal - - - 5.4 „  
 (a) Frontal breadth at the most divergent points of the  
bone in the coronal suture - 5 inches.  
 (b) Parietal breadth at the protuberances, 5.6 „  
 (c) Occipital breadth at the junction of the occipital  
with the posterior inferior angles of the parietals  
4.8 inches.
- G. *Height* from the plane of the foramen magnum at its  
centre to that of the vertex - - 5.1 inches.  
 (a) Frontal height - - 5.5 inches.

(b) Parietal height - - 5 inches.

(c) Occipital height - - 4'8 „

taken from the axis of the auditory foramina these measurements are respectively - 4'3, 4, and 4'5 inches.

H. From one auditory foramen to the other—

(a) Over the most prominent part of the frontal bone - - 11 inches.

(b) Over the parietal bones - 12 „

(c) Over the occipital bone - 13 „

I. *Length of the face* from the nasal suture to the tip of the chin, an allowance of 0'6 in. being made for the absent teeth and absorption of alveolar ridges - 4'5 inches.

J. *Breadth of the face* from the most prominent point of one zygomatic arch to that of the other - 5'2 inches.  
From the external border of one orbital ridge to that of the other - - - 4'2 inches.

K. Width of the lower jaw at the angles - 4 „

L. Proportion of the greatest breadth to the length (the latter taken as 100) - - - 0'72

M. Proportion of the height to the length - 0'66

The above measurements were taken at the request of the late Dr. W. A. Greenhill, of Hastings, who, at the time of his death in October, 1894, was engaged in preparing for the press a new edition of Sir Thomas Browne's "Urn Burial." It was his wish "to make the account more complete by giving the measurements of that great man's skull." Is it not strange that one who meditated so deeply on the transitory duration of monuments and the great mutations



of the world should have exemplified in his own relic his words to Thomas Le Gros? “But who knows the fate of his bones, or how often he is to be buried? Who hath the oracle of his ashes, or whither they are to be scattered?”

# The Skull of Sir Thomas Browne.\*

BY

CHARLES WILLIAMS, NORWICH.

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In December, 1893, the Rev. Pelham Burn, the Vicar of St. Peter Mancroft, Norwich, was desired by the Vestry to request the Board of Management of the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital to restore to the parish the skull of Sir Thomas Browne, in order that it might be reinterred in the chancel of that church as near as possible to the place in which it was originally laid. This request was occasioned by the fact that its removal from the coffin in 1840 was considered by the Vestry as a wanton act of sacrilege, and they thought every means should be attempted to undo so great a sin.

The Hospital Board, after a prolonged and careful consideration of all the circumstances which pertained to the request of the Vestry, in the end, by a unanimous vote, refused to relinquish the precious relic, and they urged, among others, the following reasons:—That as there is no

\* *Notes and Queries*, October 6th, 1894.

legal title to, or property in, any such relic, so there can be no question that this and all other specimens in the Hospital Museum belong inalienably to the Governors. That no instance is known of such a claim for restitution having been made after nearly half a century on any museum, and were the Governors to yield to this request they might be unable to resist similar claims. In consequence of this decision the Vestry at a subsequent meeting decided to take no further steps in the matter, and thus the subject was allowed to rest.

Whether the coffin was broken open accidentally or not in August, 1840, will never be known; certain it is that workmen were making a grave for the wife of the incumbent (Rev. John Bowman), when, it is asserted, they accidentally fractured with a blow of the pick-axe the lid of the coffin and thus exposed the skeleton. They then sent for a well-known antiquary living near the church, and still living near the city, who generally displays a certain reticence whenever questioned on this particular subject. At any rate, the skull was abstracted by the sexton, one George Potter, by whom it was offered to the late Mr. G. W. W. Firth, one of the surgeons to the hospital. On his refusing to purchase it, the late Dr. Edward Lubbock became its possessor, and he, in 1845, deposited it in the museum of the hospital, in which place it has been most carefully preserved to the present day. For obvious reasons no minute of the gift was entered in the hospital books, so that the exact date of its acceptance is unknown.

The coffin-plate of brass commemorative of Sir Thomas Browne measured 7 in. by 6 in., and was broken lengthwise into two nearly equal halves. It was in the form of a heraldic escutcheon, and bore the singular lines probably written by his son Edward. This is said to have been placed in the parish chest, but is not now to be found. A portion of his beard is to be seen in a glass vessel close to the skull. Sir Thomas Browne died October 19th, 1682, in his seventy-seventh year, on his birthday, as did two other illustrious men, Shakspeare and Raphael. Stukely tells us Sir Thomas Browne "dyed after eating too plentifully of a Venison Feast."

When Sir Thomas Browne's skeleton was exposed by the "accidental" opening of his coffin, it is stated, on the authority of Mr. Fitch\* that the hair was seen to be "profuse and perfect, and of a fine auburn colour." It is more than probable that his hair was not his own natural hair, but the remains of a wig. All the portraits of Sir Thomas Browne represent him as wearing one, and it was the fashion of that day to do so, and he would unquestionably be buried in it. It is difficult to believe that a man of seventy-seven, who must have suffered much anxiety and worry in an arduous practice of over forty years, and who had lost all his teeth, could have possessed a large amount of hair "of a fine auburn colour." It is much more likely to have been artificial.

NORWICH.

\* *Proceedings* of the Archæological Institution, 1847.